

THE AZUMA KABUKI DANCERS

CLINTON R. TAYLOR



The above picture is of Clinton R. Taylor, who was recently discharged from the Navy after four years of honorable service with two years in Japan. He was a YN2. He is now attending UCLA where he is studying to graduate as a teacher of English. While he was stationed in San Diego he became deeply involved in folk dancing and became a member of the VILTIS Folk Dancers appearing in Cata'an, Lithuanian, Arabic and Japanese demonstrations. The picture shows him in the delightful Kyogen (comedy) Kabuki dance which he debuted at the VILTIS Anniversary festival. He did an excellent job. Clinton was also very helpful with VILTIS, readying for press a great number of articles. He has made a host of friends in San Diego and all had the highest regard for him. He will be greatly missed by all. Sincere wishes from all goes to him for all the success the world offers. (Foto Art Noble). (Background drawing by Louis Denov)

I've seen Kabuki in Nippon during my two years tour of duty with the Navy, and I was a wee bit curious to see what their presentation in the United States would be like. I did not anticipate seeing Kabuki here in the States. I madly rushed off to Los Angeles to see the Azuma Kabuki Dancers at the Biltmore Theatre.

I was dubious when I found out that there were women in this Kabuki presentation, for women are forbidden in the Kabuki Theatre in Japan. According to the program, the Kabuki Theatre is denied them, because of tradition, but the Kabuki dance is open to them as a means of learning and performing Japanese classical dance, and, if a particular woman is excellent enough she may inherit the headship of a Kabuki Dance School from her natural or adopted father. This is the case of the leading woman dancer Tokuho Azuma. With this understanding, it seems natural then, that when S. Hurok brought this presentation to the United States that he bring the best dancers and

musicians in this field.

The three most popular of the dancers of this presentation are Tokuho Azuma (head of the company), woman head of the Azuma school of Kabuki dancing, leading woman dancer; Kikunojo Onoe, leading male dancer, headship of Onoe School of Kabuki dancing; Masaya Fujima II, choreographer, male dancer (received the name of Tokuho Azuma's mother, Masaya Fujima I, a past famous Kabuki dancer). The schools and teachers of the Kabuki are intermixed and even after reading the simplified history printed in the program, a haze of confusion is apparent.

NOH was the first great classic dance theatre of Japan, which through time was taken over by the cultivated Samurai class of people. The language and style of Noh was beyond the grasp of the average class of people in Japan. Through Kabuki a more down to earth understandable theatre was presented to the people. Simple modifications of popular Noh plays were now presented as Kabuki. You will find present Kabuki presentations mostly of pure Noh origin.

THE PROGRAM:

"CHA-NO-YU". Very properly opened was the "Tea Ceremony". The Tea Ceremony in Japan has its very strict etiquette, its many "do's" and "don'ts" and just when and how, and number of times. This is portrayed in the opening number. Of this, I was being particularly critical and my eyes were absorbing every movement with scrutiny to ascertain that not a motion or movement in etiquette was left out. And without a doubt the etiquette was perfect (natch). Little things that would not be noticed unless one was familiar with the Tea Ceremony and its way in Japan. The proper manner of handling a cup of tea, the quarter turn that is to be made prior to sipping the liquid, the correct number of sips required to finish the tea, upon completion of taking the tea the rubbing the rim of the cup where the lips touched with the finger tips before returning the cup to its original one quarter turn back in position. The bowing all in precise movements, that is so natural with the Japanese. Since this number isn't usually one of their repertory, I believe that it was arranged strictly for the American public, and not as a Kabuki dance. The style of dancing was affected modernistically and the whole essence of the dance lacked in true Kabuki spirit. But this was the opening number which invited the audience to come in and be a part of the ritualistic Tea Ceremony. Very effectively done.

"HASHI-BENKEI" (Sword-Dance). Literally translated is Bridge Strongman.. Benkei is a fable strongman most popular with the children. The Japanese use fable characters often in their presentations. The dance here in the Kabuki illustrates that period, about 1652, when dancing was banned from the Kabuki stage, when the Kabuki dancers had to resort to acting movements and pantomime to the background of music. Through this the essential dance character was portrayed in their acting, so in reality it was a dance mimed. Through accented steps and movements to show the impetus in the fight, the two dancers created the illusion and symbolization that the fight was actually going on, almost comical in a sense with the great contrast of the fighters. Benkei being large and furious, many heavy steps, demonstrative of his warlike nature, while Ushiwakamaru was small and his movements were gentle, graceful and almost dainty. The story can easily be compared with our own famous Robin Hood and his battle with Little John at their first meeting.

"OCHO" (Ancient Court Days). This is a splendidly pleasant dance of young Prince Genji (Nobility at its best), and a court lady. Very modernistic in form, and very suggestive of the love of Prince Genji and the maiden. Cos-

tumes were elegant and gorgeous and fine in color. The coiffure worn by the women of this era portrayed the long strait black hair cascading almost to the floor, on the background of the sheer silken kimonos with the tremendously exaggerated square sleeves. An easy, sleepy sort of dance, wafted away on the breezes amid the cherry trees.

"FUKITORI-TSUMA" (The would be flute player seeks a wife). One of the Noh Kyogen type of Kabuki dances. Noh Kyogen grew from a past humor and frivolity which constituted comic interludes between the more serious Noh (dance-drama). The Noh Kyogen is usually performed without music or chorus and the language is nearer to the people which affords the people the opportunity to satirize their superiors. Noh Kyogen is always delightful, demonstrating wit, humor, satire, relaxation, comic and often carrying a very strong "moral to the story." Here again the most exaggerated type of costumes were worn, beautiful and spectacular, even though this was the lighter form of drama. One man wearing the long, long, long, legged "pantaloons"; I would estimate to be about 10 to 12 feet in length, which took clever dancing and acting to manipulate the pant-legs to move and be directed where he wanted to walk. The story was simple, of a man wanting a wife and the Goddess of Mercy telling him to play upon a flute and he would be granted a wife. He doesn't succeed in playing the flute so calls to his friend, a flute teacher, and the flute is played by the teacher. A woman appears, with her face veiled and after much persuasion removes her veil. She is ugly and chases the two men, grabbing at the lenth pant legs of the one fellow. It is comical, well done and colorful and a new delight to the American people, much laughter and applause responded.

"TSUCHIGUMO" (The Dance of the Spider). The favorite of the Kabuki repertoire brought with them to the States. Tsuchigumo was permanent of the programs for both weeks' presentations. It is demonstrative that the dance character is "visible not only in the straight dance movements but in the very action and walk of the characters." Exemplified in the weird appearance of Tsuchigumo (the spider) is the frequent using of animals personified as main characters in the dances.

The dancers with the role of Tsuchigumo should never blink his eyes while he is on stage, even when he is not facing the audience. This is because it is feared that if he should wink he will lose his demonic nature and turn human. The most intriguing and amazing of the dance is upon the discovery that Tsuchigumo is not the priest that he is impersonating, but a monstrous spider, he casts a web of silvery white threaded paper over a large area of the stage, which is quickly collected by the stage assistants. The method of making the threads of paper is a secret to the theater, and it is amazing the way they are cast and collected. During the transition scene from the original scene to the Spider's cave, a song is sung telling of the struggles that the warriors are having in their march to find and conquer the monster. As all stage sets are simple, mere symbolizations, a cage is brought forward by the stage assistants and centered on the stage. Upon unveiling the cage Tsuchigumo is discovered (found in the cage). The stage hands are all dressed in black, with a black mask of cloth covering their face; they move gently on the stage, never causing attention, transforming the set from the scene to another, and since you cannot see their face and their apparent unconcern to the audience, in reality they are not even present. The best performance of the entire program and utilizing the complete spirit and affect that makes Kabuki.

"NININ-WANKYU" (Memories). Another form of original Noh form, with its attempt to form an esthetic unity between the past and the present, of the deceased returning

to the present to re-experience occurrences when he was alive. It is illustrated through the story of Ninin-Wankyu or memories where the demise of a loved girl caused such grief that Wankyu went out of his mind and thought that his lover had returned to him and they danced together. We have seen American versions of similar dances through Musical Movies where through imagination, dreams, desires all come so real that visions appear and the dance performed. Symbolic of eternity, the pine tree is the only decor on the highly polished cypress wood stage floor. In the ecstasy of his realm, cherry blossoms descend from above the stage representing the illusion of days when Wankyu danced happily with his beloved. This dance seemed almost familiar and very modernistic. It was pleasing to watch the grace and the effortlessness that the dancers possessed in executing this particular number.

"O-MATSURI-NO-HI" (Festival Day). The finale, a cheerful number without a story, appearing to be a market scene with a passing parade of variety of costumes and dancers. Including all types of classes, parading through the stage, never a drag nor delay in their entrances. Comic, serious, festive, the more peasant type folk people, and then the higher classes of Geisha and Samurai, merchants, firemen all with their own entrance dance and then the most remarkable, the dragon.—The front being one man and the rear another. The dragon was very cleverly performed and one could really see the art, the skill that it must have taken to be so animallike with so many animal gestures, such as scratching the side of his head with his hindfoot and settling down the roughed fur with his tongue, making himself comfortable to sleep. It was remarkable and clever. In conclusion, with the entire cast on the stage, they started to clap to a certain rhythm, sort of a 1, 2, 123 count and to everyone's surprise almost hypnotically the audience joined in too and soon the entire cast and audience was applauding in this fashion. If any one gets the opportunity to see Kabuki any time during their tour here in the United States, be sure not to miss it for you will enjoy it because it is so full of everything that is typical Japanese inheritance, with past and present, and demonstrative of their art and talent.



SAN DIEGO LITHUANIAN CLUB ELECTIONS

The following are the new officers of the San Diego Lithuanian Club for the coming season: Joseph Yuraitis, President; Ed Shulins, Vice President; Helen Shaulys, Recording Secretary; Mrs. Edward Sirutis, Finance Secretary and Mrs. Dee Paza, Treasurer. The club meets every first Sunday of the month at 2 p.m. at Weber's Bakery Hall, 1955 Julian.

CHICAGO DANCERS ORGANIZING

In order to establish folk activities in the area on a sounder basis, a meeting of folk dance leaders of the Chicago area was held recently. A number of projects and plans were presented but were deferred due to the great number of summer absences, vacations, etc. It was decided, however, to establish a central point of information on dance activities. This point to receive and disseminate such material to all concerned. Anyone interested in the folk movement and wanting to inquire about it should contact this "clearing house". Anyone coming to the city and wishing information on the subject has only to call or write: Bernie Kosnick, 3855 School St., Chicago 18, Ill., Phone AVenue 3-5102.